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ABSTRACT

Functional curricula are intended to facilitate the development of age-appropriate skills that are essential for participation of individuals with autism within a diversity of integrated environments. When one is considering which skills to teach, the longitudinal process of promoting increased independence throughout life must be considered, and no instructional inferences should be made. For those persons unable to acquire a skill, individualized adaptations can be developed to assist in performing skills at the maximum level of independence. Teaching the following work behaviors to persons with autism is essential to longitudinal planning: communication, rate and production, accuracy and quality, social skills, and self-management. Functional, longitudinal program planning can be facilitated by thinking of the individual in his/her future environments and then defining the priorities and behaviors needed for independent functioning in those future environments. (Contains 13 references.) (JDD)

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The University Affiliated Program of Indiana

FUNCTIONAL PROGRAMMING FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM: A SERIES . . .

GROWING TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE BY LEARNING FUNCTIONAL SKILLS AND BEHAVIORS

Barbara Porco

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c. 1989

FUNCTIONAL CURRICULA:

Those who teach persons with autism face the ongoing dilemma of establishing priorities - what to teach and how. They are advised to make learning functional. The term "functional," however, means different things to different people; for some, it means self-help skills, while to those who adopt a broader view, it means skills matched to the needs of the learner.

To help determine a common definition of functionality, consider the following. In order to determine if a curriculum activity is functional, teachers must ask themselves: If the student does not learn to perform a particular activity, will someone else have to do it for him or her (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Pumpian, Certo, & Gruenewald, 1979)? If the answer is yes, the activity is more likely to be functional than if the answer is no. For example, Paul, a 9 year old student with autism, is directed to assemble a puzzle; when he does not comply, it is not necessary for someone else to do it for him. However, when Paul is not systematically instructed to shop, someone else will have to buy his food and clothing for him when he becomes an adult.

Functional curricula facilitate the development of skills that are essential for participation within a diversity of integrated environments. While this is not a new concept, it has often been bypassed in favor of curricula stressing the teaching of developmental skills (i.e. skills performed by "normally developing" children, usually in hierarchical form). Currently, a return to a functional skills approach has been evident in publications (e.g., Wilcox & Bellamy, 1982; Brown et al. Falvey, 1986).

DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE:

An understanding of the developmental skills model can, however, be useful in helping determine where to start teaching and in suggesting how to adapt teaching within the hierarchical approach. From a developmental perspective comes the assumption that consideration must be taken of how a child's behavior and ability to learn are affected by his level of skill and understanding in different areas (Schopler & Reichler, 1971). Programming does not always have to proceed along the stages of normal development. For example, a child need not be taught to babble before he is taught to say simple words. It is also proposed that recognition of developmental levels, often differing within a child across skill areas, may be helpful in understanding a child's behavior (e.g., why a severely retarded and autistic 12 year old wants to rough house and hug people) and in providing a place to start looking for appropriate behaviors to teach (Lord & O'Neill, 1981).

LONGITUDINAL PLANNING:

People who use the developmental approach must, however, learn to ask, "Why do I want to teach this skill?" In deciding why, it is important to consider not just the present, but also the person's future. Thus the development of functional goals is a longitudinal process, and functional skills are those which promote increased independence for students in their natural environments and throughout life. Increasing the functionality of the curriculum suggests (by definition) that the person with autism will have many opportunities to engage in or display his/her learned skills (Koegel, Rincover, & Egel, 1982). We must, however, make no assumptions that skills learned in one environment will spontaneously generalize to other environments.

PARTIAL PARTICIPATION:

Zero (instructional) inferences (i.e., no inferences) result in directly teaching or at least verifying a student's skill acquisition and performance across a variety of environments (Falvey, 1986). Some persons with severe handicaps may never acquire all the skills that are needed in a variety of natural environments. These persons should not be excluded from community environments. If a person is unable to acquire a skill, the principle of partial participation (Baumgart, et al. 1982) should be used. This principle refers to allowing a person access to environments and activities even if he or she is unable to perform all the skills independently or is unable to attend for the entire length of the activity. Individualized adaptations can be developed and employed to assist the student in performing skills at the maximum level of independence (Falvey, 1986). For example, a person who has no verbal communication is not denied access to a fast food restaurant, but is taught to order by pointing to pictures.

TEACHING CRUCIAL BEHAVIORS:

While practical skills are an important part of a functional curriculum, there are also specific behaviors which are necessary for successful future employment. An examination of the Mithaug & Hagmeier (1978) survey of supervisors of fifty-six sheltered workshop programs identifies behaviors, rather than skills or knowledge, as crucial factors. Wehman (1981) lists six factors necessary for success in competitive employment; five of the six factors are behaviors. For programming purposes, these behaviors can be grouped into five areas of instruction: Communication, Rate and Production, Accuracy and Quality, Social Skills, and Self-Management (originally referred to as interfering behaviors).

Persons with autism will increasingly be employed in the community as knowledge of functional teaching broadens; however, the work behaviors listed above are those necessary for success in any job. Beginning to teach those behaviors to the very young person with autism is essential

to longitudinal planning. Since communication and interpersonal social skills are by definition areas of difficulty for persons with autism, these areas must be targeted as soon as autism is recognized in a child.

Providing a means of communication, enhancing understanding of language, and building social skills for persons with autism requires an understanding of the disorder and individualized communication/social teaching strategies. In addition, the importance of compliance to success in the work place necessitates an understanding of behavior management and implementation strategies for persons with autism. (Materials on behavior management, communication, curriculum, social/leisure, and community employment skills and planning are available from the Indiana Resource Center for Autism at the Institute for the Study of Developmental Disabilities at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana).

FUNCTIONAL IEP'S:

Developing Individual Education Programs (IEPs) which focus on work behaviors is a matter of shifting the emphasis from mastery of skills to increasing independence in work behaviors in the five areas mentioned above. For students of varying levels of functioning, each objective becomes a step in the ongoing process toward long-range "ultimate functioning," as envisioned by the parents and by the professionals who work with them.

AGE APPROPRIATENESS:

Increasing the functionality of the curriculum suggests that the student will have many natural opportunities to engage in or display his/her learned skills. In addition, the age-appropriateness of learned tasks should help reduce the stigmatizing discrepancies between students with autism and their peers. The more students with autism can approximate the behaviors of peers, the greater the opportunities for mainstreaming in school and community. Mainstreaming will result in greater opportunities for peer modeling and entrance into effective communities, which in turn, should help to improve community members' perception of the improvements in autistic children (Koegel, Rincover, & Egel, 1982).

PROJECTING THE FUTURE AND SETTING PRIORITIES:

Since autism is a disorder that is accompanied by mental retardation approximately 80% of the time, the content of functional curricula and the extent of mainstreaming will vary along a continuum with autism/severe retardation on one end, autism/no retardation on the other. While a functional program will probably include objectives in social/communication, domestic/self-care, vocational/academic, leisure/recreational, and community functioning, the program itself must be planned for the individual.

Functional, longitudinal program planning can be facilitated by thinking of the individual in his/her future environments and then defining the priorities and behaviors needed for independent functioning in those future environments. In looking toward the future, parents and professionals must look beyond today's possibilities to projected possibilities for the coming decades. We are rapidly moving into a new era - the Information Age - which will be marked by rapid and continuous change. The disabled students of today will live most of their lives in the 21st century, and we must prepare them for the complexities of life in this environment (Cain & Taber, 1987).

As further suggested by Cain & Taber, persons with disabilities will increasingly have computers at their disposal as natural tools to help them learn to solve problems in their daily lives. Teaching computer literacy from a young age can lead to future employment as well, and thus should be included in longitudinal, functional programs for persons with autism.

SUMMARY:

In summary, students with autism and other severely handicapping conditions need a curriculum that is functional rather than artificial, integrated rather than isolated, longitudinal rather than episodic, and that has minimal reliance on instructional inference (i.e. zero inference) Donnellan, Flavey, Pumpian, Baumgart, Schroeder, & Brown, 1980).

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